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We Suggest

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WE SUGGEST

Eleanor Buelke

Macdonald, James B., and Leeper, Robert R., Editors

Language and Meaning

Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA, 1966. Pp. vi + 111.

For the educator who is "deeply concerned that the human aspects of schooling are often neglected," this small, paperback volume offers shared thinking of eminent scholars on such aspects of language and meaning. For the teacher who holds that teaching children to write and think well in their native language is "the only way of assuring that one says things right and courteously and powerfully *to oneself*," this publication makes available written discussion by distinguished consultants concerning such implications.¹ For the instructor who has had a gnawing suspicion that he is, in some way, responsible for countering "the loss of self, the dehumanization and depersonalization of people living in a technological society such as ours," these presentations focus attention upon newer concepts of knowledge and knowing.

A number of currently respected and prominent educational writers link language to man's development and effectiveness as a progressively intelligent, dynamic human being. Dr. Jerome Bruner writes that, "Language is a major instrument of thought."² Smith and Dechant believe that, "The symbol without the perceiving individual is meaningless."³ They also say:

Although the word symbol itself has no meaning it provides a focal point for concept formation, and comprehension certainly depends upon the adequacy and accuracy of one's concepts.⁴

Concerning the importance of meaning to communication, Paul McKee writes:

. . . obviously communication takes places only to the extent to which the receiver makes the meaning intended by the

1. Jerome S. Bruner, *Toward a Theory of Instruction*, p. 103. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

3. Henry P. Smith and Emerald V. Dechant, *Psychology in Teaching Reading*, p. 44. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1961.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

broadcaster . . . and the degree of understanding for which a receiver should strive in his listening or reading is that which will enable him to satisfy the demands of the situation at the time and will serve him later as an effective tool in straight thinking and intelligent action.⁵

Papers presented in this book by six different authors concern the concepts of language, meaning, and motivation. The writer of the first paper, "Curricular Language and Classroom Meanings," suggests that curricular language might be too limited to face and solve problems or mysteries of language and meaning in the classrooms of today. Perhaps, educational activity, which is what curriculum is, in an actual sense, might be more adequately described and valued in reformulated aspects of curricular language. Presently, educational activity appears to be valued often in the light of technical, political, and scientific values. Viewed with consideration for aesthetic and ethical values as well, classroom learnings might become richer, more meaningful, socially and personally more significant for students and teachers.

In "Curriculum and the Analysis of Language," Mr. Phenix attempts to help teachers relate educational practices to theoretical philosophies through logical analysis and application to specific contexts. He indicates that analysis encourages respect for the subtle and complex nature of our language. Students in classrooms of analytically guided language teachers study words, not in isolation, but in relation to other words and to the structures and context in which they are used.

Dealing with the affective domain in learning, the writer of "The Discovery of Felt Meaning" states that "thinking and problem solving always occur as felt sensing and not with only the given and verbal conceptual constructs." Utilizing felt sensing, a student needs to pay attention directly to what he is trying to say, or to any other purpose for which he is using language. Mr. Gendlin hypothesizes that there may be a direct relationship between creative people and the "sort of gentle attention and explication to their felt sensing reactions, as they read and think."

In "What Language Reveals," Walter Loban writes that language and action impart meaning and significance to human perception, emotion, volition, and thought. "They are the two crucial ways of

5. Paul McKee, *Reading*, p. 24. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966.

educating mankind." As a culture or nation moves from a primitive state toward civilization, language gains in importance. The child's oral language is an important link between him, the school, and his home and social environment. It is the single, most important resource with which the child comes to school, already equipped. Beginning with the child's natural language, selected experiences which relate language to thinking and perceiving need to be emphasized in the language arts program. Language should be discovered for the fascinating "miracle" it is, and can become, for those who know its use for flexibility, modification, and manipulation of ideas.

The author of "Meaning and Thinking," Mary Jane Aschener, ascribes importance to the role of language in the evolution of human intelligence. Man's capacity for reflective thinking has paralleled his progress in making language an effective instrument of thought. She suggests that verbal language strategies to foster development of thinking abilities in students may be employed in great variety. Several descriptions of such strategies are described in some detail. Here a discerning and creative teacher may find promising and realistic approaches to curriculum patterns for helping students to adjust and shift their levels of thinking to meet the cognitive demands of a learning task.

Thomas Johnson discusses "Motivation: Some Principles, Problems and Classroom Applications" in the last section. Data from research described and reported by this writer indicate that what a teacher does in his classroom, what his characteristic behavior is, can have predictable, vitally important effects on pupil motivation and behavior. Much of a teacher's behavior is manifested through the language media. Granting that motivational theory is applied to the classroom most effectively at the operational level, teachers need to use motivational techniques amenable to their control in the classroom setting. These might include language techniques based upon the classroom social system and techniques based upon solution of problems, or completion of tasks or activities.

Perhaps, in all aspects of language teaching, the teacher can serve the learner, and himself, best by being what Bruner calls "a day-to-day working model with whom to interact . . . a part of the student's internal dialogue . . . a speaker of a language one shares with somebody."⁶

6. *Op. cit.*, p. 124.